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Jihadism from a subcultural perspective

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Abstract

Current trends in Western jihadism point to the renewed relevance of subcultural theory. This article outlines a novel subcultural perspective that synthesizes subcultural theory with recent accounts of intersectionality and argues that such an approach enables an understanding of jihadism as a collective and cultural response to a shared experience of marginalization and othering. In addition, this theoretical perspective offers a framework for comprehending the processes of bricolage central to subcultural collective creativity. This article illustrates this potential by analyzing examples of jihadi rap. Such analyses represent important contributions to studies of the broader cultural and social ecology of jihadi subculture.

Keywords: intersectionality, jihadi culture, jihadi rap, jihadism, masculinity, radicalization, subculture

Introduction

Across the academic world, interest in extremism, political violence, radicalization, and terrorism is growing. The reason is obvious: in recent years, the world has witnessed a large number of attacks

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carried out by people often referred to as "jihadists," "militant Islamists" or "radical Islamists." The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ("ISIS") in the Middle East and North Africa has attracted foreign fighters born and raised in the West.

Given these developments, knowledge regarding extremism and radicalization has become a high priority on both political and scholarly agendas. While the research that has been conducted has been multidisciplinary, employing a broad range of methodological and theoretical approaches, it has been dominated by individual psychological approaches (for a discussion, see, e.g., Crone 2016; Kundnani 2012) or drawn inspiration from theories of political or social movements (for an overview, see, e.g., Borum 2001a). The characteristics and composition of radical groups and their supporters[2] seem to be changing in a direction that merits theoretical rethinking, however. We observe three important recent tendencies: 1) the convergence between criminal gang/street cultures and jihadist groups (Basra and Neumann 2016; Ilan and Sandberg 2019; Wilson and Sullivan 2007); 2) the development of hybrid cultural forms combining the symbolism of youth street culture, including rap music and streetwear, with jihadism (Andersen and Sandberg 2018; Conti 2017; Picart 2015); and 3) the emergence of environments supportive of jihadism and/or a strict Salafist[3] interpretation of Islam. While such radical groups and their supporters make up a small percentage of the overall Western Muslim populations, they are large enough to be important analytically.[4]

In this article, we are concerned with these broader radical groups and their supporters, including their overlaps with street culture and their symbolic and stylistic representation. We refer

[2] By "radical groups and their supporters," we mean informal and vaguely defined groups, who may not be involved directly in jihadi terrorism and political violence, but who may be sympathetic towards it, support it and/or be attracted or fascinated by it.

[3] Broadly defined, Salafism denotes a traditional and orthodox interpretation of Islam.

[4] A British intelligence report mentions 23,000 supporters of radical Islamism in Britain (O'Neill, Hamilton, Karim, and Swerling 2017), and a survey conducted by the Swedish paper**,** *Göteborgs-Posten*, found that more than 10% of young people in some marginalized residential areas support ISIS (Verdicchio 2016). While these numbers cannot be equated with jihadi subculture, they do indicate that the amount or percentage of Muslims who support radical groups is considerable.

to them as *jihadi subculture*, and our discussion concerns these broader groups (rather than individual perpetrators of violent terrorism). We argue that a subcultural theoretical approach is highly relevant for understanding these radical groups and their supporters, and we observe that this perspective has hitherto had a marginal presence in the study of jihadism. Analysis of symbolic and stylistic elements has been central in the study of other (violent) subcultures, such as the connection between skinhead and white power music and their political violence (see, e.g., Brown 2004; Corte and Edwards 2008; Cotter 1999; Futrell et al. 2006; Shaffer 2013). A subcultural perspective may thus enhance our understanding of jihadism in the West (and elsewhere) and may also become an important contribution to studies of what Hegghammer (2017a) has termed *jihadi culture*, which is central to understanding what keeps jihadi groups together and what makes them attractive to potential new "members." The aim of this article is thus twofold: 1) to discuss the relevance of a subcultural approach to the study of jihadism; and 2) to illustrate the relevance of this approach through an analysis of one of the abovementioned hybrid cultural forms, jihadi rap. In the concluding part, we will also discuss the potential and pitfalls of this approach.

Theoretical debates and earlier use of subcultural theory in the field

This article does not aim to present a detailed theoretical explanation for radicalism and radicalization in the West (for an overview, see, e.g., Borum 2011a, 2011b). As mentioned above, however, we see two prevalent theoretical currents in research on extremism and jihadism. The first builds on insights from research on social movements, whereas the second attempts to outline individual psychological stage models of radicalization. Of these approaches, subcultural theory is closer to social movement theories but offers a more sophisticated understanding of collective cultural creativity, as well as an appreciation of the complexity of social and structural context(s). The psychological stage models consider radicalization to be a linear and individual psychological process. Thus, Kundnani (2012)

has argued against the individualistic and psychological focus of existing conceptualizations of radicalization that, according to him, has removed social and political circumstances from the analysis. Following Kundnani, we make the case for an understanding that places a greater emphasis on social and political (including geopolitical) context(s), as well as collective aspects of jihadism. Subcultural theory can meet these requirements.

To be sure, subcultural theory has not been entirely absent in research on jihadism. Cottee (2011) has applied Cohen's (1955) theory of delinquent subcultures to propose that the development of jihadist groups can be interpreted as a subcultural response or solution to the strain caused by socioeconomic/class marginality. Hemmingsen (2015) has employed Roszak's (1995) theory of counterculture in an attempt to grasp the style[5] of jihadist groups and the social and personal gains involved in joining them. Pisoiu (2015) has tested subcultural theory against a number of qualitative cases and found support for the explanatory value of concepts such as bricolage, homology and resistance. Conti (2017) has analyzed online jihadi rap using a perspective drawn from early subcultural theory, developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (see below), and has argued for the importance of combining this perspective with visual sociology in order to explore subcultural styles as they appear in virtual spaces. Andersen and Sandberg (2018) have examined the now defunct ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, from a subcultural and social movement perspective, emphasizing provocation through celebration of extreme violence, such as brutal executions, as a means of attracting people drawn to such acts. Walklate and Mythen have also granted subcultural theory some explanatory power for its accentuation of the importance of social bonds and networks but have maintained that subcultural processes "cannot but be formed in a structural context" (2016: 338). With these studies in mind, we

[5] By "style," we mean the aesthetic symbolism of jihadi groups and their supporters, defined broadly and including, but not limited to, argot, demeanor, and style of clothing. See Hebdige (1979) for a thorough treatment of "style" as a central element of subcultures.

propose an approach that includes structural context but that extends beyond a focus on official ISIS propaganda and concrete social networks, and thus expands the subcultural perspective to include larger groups supportive of jihadism and their symbolic and stylistic repertoires.

All the above-mentioned contributions have been valuable and constitute the backdrop for our argument. Without disregarding them, however, we believe that subcultural theory has more to offer because these contributions have not been linked to the most recent debates within subcultural theory.

A subcultural perspective

Recent developments within subcultural theory has produced a Birmingham School-inspired conception of subculture, albeit one based on a synthesis of existing debates, and Jensen (2017) has argued that this version of subcultural theory has important potential for studying jihadism. In this section, we outline the the development of this version of subcultural theory, beginning with early efforts and permutations.

The first wave of subcultural theory emerged from the Chicago School of Sociology and included such authors as Shaw and McKay (1942), Miller (1958, 1959), Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960). Cohen was the first to understand subcultures as an attempted collective solution to a shared problem, rendering his theory "the first real subcultural theory" (Bay and Drotner 1986: 11) or the "gold standard" of subcultural theory (Cottee 2011: 737).

The second wave of subcultural theory derived from the CCCS (Cohen 2002 [1972]; Hall and Jefferson 1991 [1975]; Hebdige 1979; Mungham and Pearson 1978; Willis 1978; for overviews, see, e.g., Brake 1985; Muggleton 2005; Williams 2011). Although the body of work developed by the CCCS was quite heterogeneous (Griffin 2011), some common denominators can be identified. The perspective was promulgated to grasp the situated agency and the cultural and stylistic practices of young people who participated in subcultures. These young people were seen as trying to solve or

answer a shared situation of classed and generational social contradictions through collective cultural creativity. This represented a break from seeing these young people as criminal, deviant or pathological—a view prevalent in early criminological subcultural theory (Blackman 2014). The CCCS thus argued that subcultures were, *at the same time,* responses to shared problems *and* manifestations of dissent with or resistance to the existing social order.

In this process of resistance, the young people were said to draw upon a wide range of resources. This included a focus on the ways in which subcultures appropriated pre-existing symbols and gave them new meaning. These processes were conceptualized as *bricolage* or *hybridity*—terms used to describe how subcultures, through their creative use of (existing) commodities, could rebuff the existing social order. Subcultures, such as the Mods, transformed clothing, such as the suit and tie—business world symbols signaling efficiency and a compliance with conventional society—to objects desirable in their own right, expressing subcultural rather than dominant values (Hebdige 1979). This cultural creativity was also seen as part of constructing viable individual and collective identities (Brake 1985).

It is precisely this type of stylistic agency that can now be observed among jihadist groups and their supporters, in the form of the combination and mixing of hip-hop and street culture symbolism with Salafi ideas, qualities and dressing styles. This may seem quite paradoxical to the outsider for two reasons: 1) the interpretation of Salafism promoted by jihadists most often prohibits music; and 2) this appears to be a combination of a subcultural style based in the United States (U.S.) and an anti-American and puritan ideology. The styles and aesthetics that are combined, however, share a highly oppositional character. Combined, they constitute a strong symbol of dissent.

To be sure, feminist scholars have criticized the work of the CCCS on the grounds that it privileged male perspectives and tended to legitimize masculinity (McRobbie 1980, 1990; McRobbie and Garber 1975; see also Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002: 53). The framework has also been

criticized for inadequate theorization of race and ethnicity (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002; Gilroy 1993a). Taking these critiques seriously means that an adequate theoretical conception of subculture should reflect that class, ethnicity and gender cannot be understood in isolation and that analyses must consider the complexity of social differentiation (Bjurström 1997; Carrabine 2017; Hollingsworth 2015).

Inspired by the theoretical creativity of the CCCS, Jensen (2017) has suggested that a rethinking and renewal of subcultural theory may be achieved through a dialogue with feminist accounts of intersectionality. These accounts constitute a diverse theoretical tradition, unified by an analytical interest in social complexity and issues of power and dominance (Collins 2015; see also Henne and Troshynski 2019). Collins' (1989) original account emphasized social structures woven together into what she referred to as a *matrix of domination* (see also Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Later developments added a focus on identity at the micro level. Intersectional theorists have thus argued that intersectional analysis should be *multilevel* and strive to grasp the interplay between micro, meso, and macro levels of the social world (Choo and Ferree 2010; Hancock 2007).

Despite differences and variations, the common theoretical assertion of feminist accounts of intersectionality is then that different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall social structures, as well as in creating complex individual identities. Class, ethnicity, gender and race are intertwined, rather than parallel, and can therefore not be analyzed separately (Henne and Troshynski 2019; Potter 2013; Trahan 2011). We are, as humans, never just men or women (or non-binary); we are also always positioned in terms of class, ethnicity and race in ways that have consequences for our gender identities, just as gender identity will have an effect on class identity, for example (Jensen and Christensen 2011). Furthermore, this mutual constitution takes place as an interplay between different categories and different levels of the social—and this may often take paradoxical or contradictory forms.

Integrating this perspective into subcultural theory allows us to consider individuals participating in a subculture—in our case, participants in a jihadi subculture—in a complex way that includes their classed, ethnic, gendered and religious positions. Accordingly, we argue that a dialogue between subcultural theory and intersectionality offers a new perspective on jihadism—one that provides a deeper understanding of the structural context that Walklate and Mythen (2016: 338) maintain must be part of subcultural analysis. A combination of subcultural and intersectional perspectives can thus be central to grasping the dynamic social mechanisms behind radicalization. Existing empirical studies and journalistic reports indicate that radicalization is related to experiences of social marginalization—or, perhaps more accurately—*othering* (Cottee 2011; Hegghammer 2016; Seierstad 2017; Sheikh 2015; Walklate and Mythen 2016). This othering can be understood as intersectional insofar as while Muslim minorities in the West are often subject to Islmaphobia and racism, their marginalization or othering is also related to age, class and gender because young lower-class *male* Muslims are perceived as particularly problematic. In other words, the current discursive defamation of Muslims is not only ethnic and racial; it is also classed and gendered (Gottzén and Jonsson 2012). Hence, the interplay between class, ethnicity and gender produces a specific form of social marginality. The formation of a broad jihadi subculture may be understood as a collective reaction to this marginality.

A further advantage of creating a dialogue between subcultural theory and feminist accounts of intersectionality is that this can help us grasp the complex politics of jihadism. A multidimensional, intersectional analysis enables an analysis of how subcultures that articulate opposition to or resistance against some forms of structural domination—typically classed and raced—can simultaneously reproduce or strengthen gendered or sexual hierarchies through homophobia, masculinity, or sexism. Militancy and the use of violence can be considered a specifically male repertoire, and the development of a hard and aggressive masculinity may constitute a specifically

male answer to a shared situation of perceived or actual social marginality (Christensen and Jensen 2010; Hughey 2009; Parpart 2015). This has been the case elsewhere, such as with skinheads and right-wing militias, who seek to restore a working-class masculinity which they perceive as threatened (see, e.g., Brown 2004; Cotter 1999; Kimmel and Ferber 2000). In the case of jihadi subculture, the subcultural response that is provided is also highly homophobic, masculinist, and misogynist, as well as racist (anti-Semitic).

Viewing jihadism as a subculture that provides an "answer" to problems specific to participants' shared social position (in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and race) might also aid in understanding why becoming a participant in such a subculture can be attractive. Joining such a subculture thus offers social status in the shape of subcultural capital (Jensen 2006) or street capital (Sandberg 2007). In other words, jihadi subculture may be considered a collective and "creative" cultural answer that is situated in a socially complex way and that offers a viable identity, rendering jihadist activities meaningful *from within*. As discussed above, however, this tradition also provides tools for empirical analysis of the hybrid forms of cultural expression central to current jihadi subculture. To illustrate this potential empirically, we will now turn to an analysis of jihadi rap music.

Method and material

Below, we analyze examples of the paradoxical genre, jihadi rap, as an element of jihadi subculture. We identified the musical material that we analyzed through a methodology inspired by *virtual ethnography* (Hine 1998), which has become an accepted method for investigating subcultures and countercultures online (see, e.g., Maratea and Kavanaugh 2012; Williams 2003). Following Larsen and Glud (2013), this methodology often implies that from the outset, one does not have a fixed idea of which type of empirical material is relevant. Instead, virtual ethnography relies on a kind of snowballing, wherein empirical findings on one site lead to other sites. Jihadi rap is thus a diffuse and

fluid phenomenon, which is hard to fix as a traditional research subject that can be identified in well-defined spaces.

In our research, we began by using search words and phrases, such as "hip-hop and Islam," "jihadi hip-hop," and "jihadi rap" on Google. These searches lead to journalistic sites and blogs covering the phenomenon of rap with jihadist messages. The songs mentioned on these sites were the starting points. Following the links to the songs led to the video-sharing website, YouTube, and other streaming media, where we were able to identify more songs. The analysis below includes songs that we found to be illustrative of the overall genre and that apparently have a substantial number of listeners (for instance the song "Dirty Kuffar," analyzed below, had over 100,000 views on YouTube at the time of writing). A primary criterion for inclusion was thus that the messages in the songs revolve around jihadist themes.

The analysis was carried out as a theoretically-informed qualitative content analysis, focusing primarily on the manifest meaning of text but also including visual material (music videos), as well as the actual sound of the music and its style. We attempted to strike a balance between theoretical reading and empirical openness. We cannot say how the music is interpreted and used among radical groups and their supporters. Our approach instead allows insight into the symbolic and stylistic cultural repertoire of jihadi subculture.

Three examples of jihadi rap as a subcultural genre

Rap music and hip-hop culture have a tradition of being oppositional and articulating radical social critique. In the late 1980s and 1990s, many rappers and groups, such as Paris and Public Enemy, rapped about Black consciousness and identity. Identifying as Black and embracing one's blackness was a way to express opposition towards a society perceived as racist. Sometimes, the opposition was also expressed through a Muslim vernacular. Rappers, such as Brand Nubian, made explicit

references to the Nation of Islam and its leader, Louis Farrakhan, and the Five-Percent Nation of Islam.[6] Ice Cube's 1991 song, "I Wanna Kill Sam," is a good example of how the opposition was sometimes framed in a hybrid combination of gangsta rap discourse and Islamist symbolism. The urge to kill (Uncle) Sam was accompanied by explicit visual references to Black Islam in the United States (U.S.). Jihadi rap, in turn, inscribes itself into a tradition of opposition and Islam in hip-hop while adding an element of jihad or holy war against the West.

When examining Westerners who have joined ISIS and other terrorist organizations, it is not uncommon to find rappers or former rappers (quite paradoxical because, as mentioned, music is unlawful in ISIS). Examples include Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, Raphael Hostey, and Ray Matimba from England (Robinson 2017; Vambe 2017); Emerson Begolly and Omar Hammami from the U.S. (Fisher 2011); and Anas el-Abboubi from Italy (CBS News 2016). Another well-known example is Deso Dogg from Germany, who joined ISIS under the name Abu Talha al-Almani. We will return to him below (see also Conti 2017; Pisoiu 2015).

Since the early 2000s, several examples of rap songs with jihadist messages have emerged from Western societies. In 2004, the British Muslim rappers, Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, released the song "Dirty Kuffar." As mentioned above, the most viewed version of the song on YouTube currently has been seen more than 100,000 times.[7] The song contains a radical critique of geopolitical issues, such as Western military aggression in Muslim countries, and a condemnation of some leaders in Muslim countries who are interpreted as cooperating with Western leaders. The "dirty kuffar"—or disbelievers—in the song include George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Ronald Reagan. The song is also anti-Zionist insofar as it calls for the deaths of "zionazis," while celebrating Osama bin Laden and the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001: *"Peace to Hamas and the Hizbollah/OBL*

[6] A Black religious, cultural and political movement founded in 1964 in Harlem, the district or neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan, and grounded in an unorthodox interpretation of Islam.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWZd088e2Lg.

[Bin Laden] *pulled me like a shiny star/Like the way we destroyed them two tower ha-ha."* Political opposition to the West is evident throughout the lyrics and the style of the video. The rappers pose with the Quran in one hand and a gun in the other. The video thus sends a clear militaristic jihadist message to viewers. The beat is taken from the popular Lumidee song, "Never Leave You,"[8] from 2003—a danceable summer hit set in the ghettos of the U.S. and inspired by Jamaican dance hall music (a Jamaican version of hip-hop). In "Dirty Kuffar," the rhythm, however, generates emotions of violence and battle as the beat in the beginning of the song is accompanied by videos of militants marching. A common cultural practice within dance hall music is the recycling of rhythm tracks so that a specific rhythm is used in multiple songs. "Dirty Kuffar" inscribes itself in this tradition. Thus, the song is inspired by both American popular music and dance hall music from Jamaica.

Somewhat ironically, while the song condemns the West, it also clearly recycles, adapts and appropriates Western popular music. The dance hall inspiration might even be the most paradoxical element because dance hall music has its roots in reggae music, which is influenced by Rastafarian culture, which is grounded in orthodox Christianity and shares symbolism with Judaism (Barnett 2012). From a subcultural perspective, this is an example of *bricolage* which, as noted above, is a form of cultural creativity wherein existing symbols, cultural outputs and styles are mixed and given new meaning (Hebdige 1979). Here, a radical critique of the West and Judaism is mixed with symbolism and musical traditions that are rooted deeply in popular Western culture. This reinterpretation is clearly a cultural way of expressing opposition to the perceived oppression of Muslims both in the West and in the Middle East and the leading role of "kuffar" in world politics. The militaristic symbolism of the song also articulates a distinctive militant hypermasculinity as the rappers are portrayed as "real men" willing to fight against the oppressors.

[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBGUFzGnsII

In 2005, the Mujahideen Team, or M-Team, which consists of Puerto Rican Muslim rappers from Boston and Brooklyn, released the album "Clash of Civilizations." The title of the album is a reference to Samuel P. Huntington's 1996 book—*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*—that predicts a scenario in which the West is at war with Islam (Huntington 1996). The Mujahideen Team's album contains songs that follow this analysis. As with "Dirty Kuffar," many of the songs on the album are examples of how jihadi rap adds the element of holy war between the West and the true Muslims to the tradition of opposition and Islam within hip-hop. In one of the less jihad-invoking songs, opposition to the West is expressed through a critique of Western ideals regarding women. The song, "Blue Nile," focuses on Muslim women, how they dress and act, and how those are the opposite of the ideals for women in the West:

> She looks fly with hijab/proper adapt/studied in hadiths […] Her body like a treasure/gold hidden in mines/she wore her khimar/for the sake of Allah/hunted by the Western society/by the kuffar/her long dress came down to the ankles of her feet […] She was created through the physics of the Man/and all I could see/was her beautiful face and her hands […] One of Allah's most beautiful creatures/properly covered and dressed as a believer/a beautiful pearl/covered in the shell of piety/the opposite of nakedness/of Western society.

Muslim women are described as beautiful in their traditional hijab, which covers the whole body and reveals only the face and hands. In the song, this is portrayed as the opposite of nakedness, which is interpreted as the Western promiscuous and problematic ideal for women. The song constructs two opposing images of women. According to the song, wearing the hijab for the sake of Allah causes women to be hunted in Western society. From an intersectional perspective, the song can be interpreted as an oppositional response to the common media presentation in the West of the veiled Muslim woman as a victim in need of rescuing from a white Christian West. Instead of seeing the headscarf as a symbolic example of female oppression, the song praises the Muslim woman as a beautiful spiritual being—and in contrast to the hyper-sexualized women in Western culture. The song thus redefines Muslim womanhood from women in need of rescue to spiritual and desexualized women who are worthy of praise. According to Necef (2016), radical Islam offers an idealized and

rigidly complementary and essentialist gender ideology—an idea of men and women as different and opposite genders. Along similar lines, Messerschmidt and Rohde (2018) have analyzed how Osama bin Laden referred to men engaging in jihad against the U.S. and Israel as masculine heroes protecting the *umma* (a grammatically feminine term describing the worldwide community of Muslims). In many ways, then, "Blue Nile" supports these concepts with its definition of women as spiritual and its construction of a "strong" militant and heroic masculinity of men protecting "their" women. Defining Muslim men as "real men" and Muslim women as "real women" can thus be seen as a strongly gendered response to perceived injustice towards Muslims.

The Mujahideen Team mixes the Western cultural style of rap music with lyrics that are highly critical of the Western way of life. It is common to find Western rap music that is political, opposes capitalism, and is full of criticism of leaders and politicians—and, as mentioned above, this critique has sometimes been expressed through a Muslim vernacular. But the songs by the Mujahideen Team, as well as by Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, add the element of religion and jihad. Their songs and videos are not about the (Black) oppressed vs. the (White) political elite; they are about the oppressed Muslims vs. the kuffar political elite.

The last jihadi rapper addressed here is also probably the most famous—Deso Dogg (Abu Talha al-Almani)—a gangsta rapper from Germany, who released four albums before becoming a foreign fighter in Syria around 2009. In a video released by ISIS called "My Oath to the Islamic State" (Zelin 2014), Deso Dogg/Abu Talha al-Almani explains how he left his music career behind and joined ISIS. His plan was originally to integrate Islam as a part of his songs and thereby influence his listeners. An example of this is the song "Wilkommen In Meiner Welt," in which Deso Dogg raps about street life in Berlin but combines this with practicing spiritual aspects of Islam. As a rapper, he was clearly influenced by U.S. rappers, such as Tupac Shakur, as evidenced by his release of an album with the title "Alle Augen Auf Mich," which is a direct translation of the Tupac's album title "All

Eyez on Me." As a member of ISIS, he has performed *anashid* (plural form of the word *nashid*), which is a form of Islamic chant (Lahoud 2017). His themes usually address Allah, Islam, jihad and martyrdom. Several of his anashid are in German. In one of these, *Wahct doch auf!* [Wake up!], he chants about bombs falling on Muslims and how the kuffar target women and children: "*Bomben fallen. Bomben fallen. Auf Irak und Philistine. Sie zerstören unsere Din* [Bombs are falling. Bombs are falling. On Iraq and Palestine. They destroy our holy way of life]. *Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Mütter schreien. Kinder weint.* [Allah is greater! Allah is greater! Mothers are screaming. Children are crying.]" He also chants about the fight in Khorasan (a historically Islamic region) and how the martyrs have the enemy in their eyes after they die:

> Wandert aus. Wandert aus. Uzbekistan. Afghanistan. Wir kämpfen in Khorasan. Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Inshallah! Inshallah! Wir kämpfen. Fallen Shuhada. Dem Feind im Augen. Bismillah. Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar![9]

This nashid reflects the genre's common themes: jihad and martyrdom.

These themes are also used on the album, "Straight Outta Syria," from 2015.[10] The album was released by Traphouse Syria, but Deso Dogg's name appears on the cover, and several of his rap songs are on the album. It is unlikely that he himself was involved in releasing the album, as music in any form is *haram* (unlawful) according to the laws of ISIS. The title of the album is a reference to the U.S. gangsta rap group N.W.A.'s album, "Straight Outta Compton," from 1988, and the songs are the same type of gangsta rap songs as those released by Deso Dogg before he became a jihadist. Some of the songs are mixed with anashid, however. For example, the song "#fuckwithmeyouknowimhelal" is a remix of the Jay-Z and Rick Ross song, "FuckWithMeYouKnowIGotIt." Here, the nashid mentioned above is mixed into the song by Jay-Z

[9] This translates as: Migrate. Migrate. Uzbekistan. Afghanistan. We are fighting in Khorasan. Allah is greater! Allah is greater! Inshallah! Inshallah! We´re fighting. Fallen martyrs. The enemy is in our gaze. In the name of God. God is greater! God is greater!

[10] https://audiomack.com/album/trapspotsyria/straight-outta-syria

and Rick Ross. The chorus is as follows: "*Allahu akbar!/Fuck with me/you know I got it/Allahu akbar!/Sexy bitch/I hope she 'bout it/Allahu akbar!/Come fuck with me/you know I got it*." The first verse consists of the nashid: "*Bomben fallen. Bomben fallen. Auf Irak und Philistine. Sie zerstören unsere Din. Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Mütter schreien. Kinder weint…*" Throughout the verse, the nashid is accompanied by the beat from the Jay-Z and Rick Ross song. The second verse is Jay-Z rapping about coming to Rome, spending money, driving Lamborghinis and drinking expensive wine. In this way, the song is a mixture of a nashid by a jihadist from ISIS and a rap song by world-famous rappers from the U.S.

The title, "#fuckwithmeyouknowimhelal," can be interpreted in different ways. One way could center around *halal* or *helal*, which is the Arabic word for acting in accordance with Sharia law, meaning that disbelievers/kuffar can attack (fuck with) believers all they want, but in the end, the believers will win because they have God on their side and act according to the Sharia. Another interpretation is that it is a call for women to have sex with believers and thus follow the original message in the Jay-Z and Rick Ross song (if one replaces the rappers with true believers). In other words, either a heroic militant or a strongly sexualized minority masculinity is constructed. The song thus presents a paradoxical mixture of different cultural styles. On the one hand, the song is a nashid from ISIS, which prohibits drinking alcohol and demands that women cover their entire body in public; on the other hand, it is U.S. rap music that is materialistic and, at least in this song, positions women as sex objects. Mixing a nashid with rap music is therefore an example of bricolage, which mixes subcultural styles that are oppositional.

Across Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, The Mujahideen Team, and Deso Dogg, the analysis illustrates that jihadi rap adapts and appropriates a tradition of Black radicalism, a critique of racism, and general social injustice within rap music. Jihadi rap, however, has an explicit politico-religious dimension that adds the element of jihad, unlike earlier types of rap that made only broad

reference to Islam. The analysis thus illustrates that dissent and critique are expressed *both* through an oppositional style *and* through explicit critique in the lyrics of the rappers. The latter most often consist of a challenge to Western geopolitical military aggression and occupation across the globe. This is often found among jihadists as, for example, in the public statements by Bin Laden (Messerschmidt and Rohde 2018). The strongly and sometimes militant masculine lyrics and style of the songs can thus be understood as connected to a jihadist worldview where true Muslim men must fight against a perceived Western occupation of holy Islamic lands.

Jihadi rap is thus a way to express resistance through a creative cultural bricolage of different, in some sense contradictory, cultural styles, and can be interpreted as the explicit manifestation of a broader collective, oppositional and subcultural answer to a shared situation of experienced othering. We can furthermore say that from an intersectional perspective, there are obvious references to ethnicity and religion; however, this type of rap is also strongly gendered and masculinist. Thus, jihadi rap is an example of resistant subcultures that articulate a strongly masculinist style as well as, in some cases, a distinct construction of Muslim femininity.

Discussion

In the previous sections, we outlined a theoretical framework for understanding jihadi subculture and illustrated its relevance by applying it to jihadi rap. Here, we discuss some potential benefits to our approach and some limitations to this theoretical framework.

Following Hegghammer's (2017b:5) call to study *jihadi culture*, which he defined as "products and practices that do something other than fill the basic military needs of jihadi groups," we agree that there is a lack of knowledge regarding the cultural dimension of jihadism. Such a gap is problematic because it results in an anemic understanding of the phenomenon. Hegghammer's work, however, focuses on actual terrorist groups rather than radical groups and their supporters. As

such, it can be maintained that the study of jihadi culture needs to be broadened and that a subcultural perspective can be helpful in this endeavor.

In a sense, such phenomena might present themselves as marginal. For instance, jihadi rap is a rather narrow genre because strict Salafi interpretations of Islam proscribe this type of music (and any other involving instruments). Nevertheless, analysis of jihadi cultural expressions, such as jihadi rap, offers insights into the broader subcultural terrain surrounding jihadism. To be clear, however, we do not equate listening to or performing jihadi rap with actually joining a militant Islamist organization. We suggest, however, that for some, it may be part of a path that leads in that direction. More importantly, though, the analysis of subcultural styles, such as jihadi rap, is an important contribution to the study of the broader cultural and social ecology of a jihadi subculture that is important in its own right.

Returning to the observations that were outlined at the beginning of this article, we believe that a subcultural perspective has important potential for analyzing what has become known as *jihadi cool*—the trend of emulating the masculine jihadist warrior and the increasing convergence between street culture and jihadism (Cottee 2015; Dantschke 2014; Herding 2014; Picart 2015; Sageman 2008). Jihadi rap can thus be understood as part of what makes jihad appealing—indeed, *cool*—among some young Muslims in the West. Research has also noted the shift from a criminal past to involvement in jihadist terrorist groups and activities, which is referred to as "crossover" (Christensen and Mørck 2017; Wilson and Sullivan 2007), "the Crime-Terror Nexus" (Basra and Neumann 2016; Hutchinson and O'malley 2007; Ibáñez 2013) or "the Crime-Terror Continuum" (Makarenko 2004). From a subcultural perspective, this crossover between street culture and jihadism could be interpreted as a dialectic interplay between a cultural and stylistic crossover and convergence between street culture and jihadi culture, on the one hand, and the movement or crossover of actual people from street culture to jihadi organizations, on the other hand. In fact, cultural and stylistic convergence

may be considered both a prerequisite and a catalyst for the crossover of actual people. Pieslak (2017: 75) argues that by presenting their message or ideology through a musical style that is popular among young people in the West, jihadists try to connect with new generations of holy fighters. This is undoubtedly sometimes the case, as jihadist propaganda can be very professional. But it is also a very instrumental reading. An alternative interpretation would be that jihadi subculture and Black oppositional street culture (including gangsta rap and hip-hop) emerge from similar frustrations. They share the same source, provide answers to the same shared situations, and are both oppositional. Therefore, it is quite logical that they would converge.

The most important discussion regarding the application of subcultural theory is related to the ethical and political aspects of methodology. Subcultural theory was designed to understand subcultures on their own terms, moving beyond the normative assumption of them as deviant and problematic. Subcultural theory, therefore, implies a kind of inherent methodological attempt to understand the view from within, as it views subcultures as intelligible and meaningful. Therefore, it is important to consider whether the perspective suggested here risks romanticizing jihadi subculture by pointing to cultural creativity and stressing the collective experiences of othering and classed marginality as core mechanisms behind its formation (for a parallel discussion of the risk within cultural criminology of romanticizing criminals and subcultures, see O'Brien (2005) and Hayward (2016)).

To clarify, we view our perspective as implying *a methodological willingness to understand* rather than a *normative or political sympathy*. We believe that criminological analysis presumes what Wacquant refers to as *moral bracketing* (Wacquant 1999: 152ff)—an insistence on grasping the meaningfulness of social practices and making them understandable in their context regardless of the researcher's normative stance towards such practices. This may be even more important when the practices that are researched are commonly considered criminal, deviant or even *evil*—as has been

prevalent in subcultural studies on skinheads and neo-Nazis. In other words, trying to grasp the mechanisms behind the emergence of jihadist subculture should be central to the research field. In that sense, our contribution may help to answer the crucial questions of *why* and *why now*, offering what Massey and Hall (2010) have referred to as a *conjunctural analysis*—that is, an analysis that contextualizes a given phenomenon in its historic specificity. The research field must attempt to address the question of *why* jihadism appeals to a relatively large number of young Muslims in the West today. Subcultural theory is highly relevant for this question of *root causes.*

Conclusion

We have argued above for the relevance of a subcultural approach to the study of jihadi subculture and have illustrated the potential of that approach through an empirical analysis of jihadi rap. The idea of subcultures as a collective answer to a shared situation can help us comprehend the mechanisms behind the emergence of jihadi subculture among Muslim populations in the West, especially among young Muslim men. Empirical studies indicate that radicalization is related to an experience of social marginalization in terms of everyday experiences of Islamaphobia and othering, more generally. Viewing jihadism as a subculture that can provide an "answer" to this shared experience provides an understanding as to why joining jihadi subculture can be attractive. From this perspective, jihadi rap can be interpreted as a way to express resistance through a bricolage of different, and quite contradictory, oppositional cultural styles.

The relevance of a subcultural perspective surpasses the obviously subcultural case of rap, however, because this theoretical perspective provides insights into the social gains related to joining such groups while also enabling an analysis of the role that such categories as class, ethnicity, gender, and race play in the formation of jihadi subculture. A subcultural perspective would also enable researchers to analyse the increasing convergence of jihadi subculture and general street culture. As

such, that type of analysis is particularly germane to research on jihadi culture. In other words, a subcultural perspective may be a viable alternative to a problematic discourse of "radicalization" that focuses either on religion or Islam as the only cause of radicalization or on individual psychological pathologies. Therefore, a subcultural perspective may help us answer the crucial questions of *why?* and *why now?*

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